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### The Fiber of Our Lives: A Conceptual Framework for Looking at Textiles' Meanings

Beverly Gordon

*University of Wisconsin - Madison*, [bgordon@wisc.edu](mailto:bgordon@wisc.edu)

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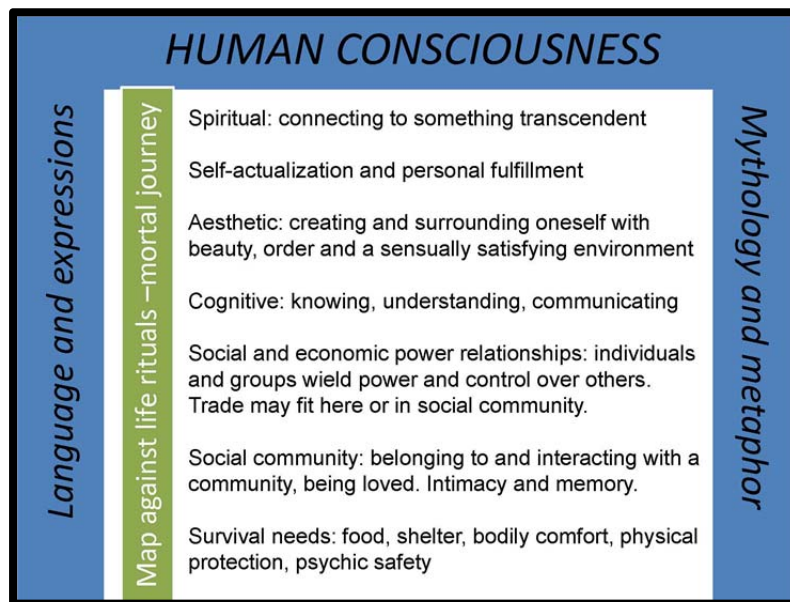
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## THE FIBER OF OUR LIVES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR LOOKING AT TEXTILES' MEANINGS

BEVERLY GORDON  
bgordon@wisc.edu

I have been fascinated for decades with all of the meanings that fiber and cloth can hold—they are a universal part of human life, and fill an almost endless number of roles in our practical, personal, emotional, social, communicative, economic, aesthetic and spiritual lives. I have worked at finding meaningful ways to both explain textiles' importance, and organize and synthesize the many disparate ideas that are part of this phenomenon. The following is the holistic framework or conceptual model I have developed that can be used to articulate and compare the meanings of textiles of any given culture or historic period. It is designed to be as inclusive as possible—to allow us to think about textiles and the roles they play in human consciousness and through the full range of human activities and concerns. As we examine a given tradition, we consider how the textiles “fit” in each of the stated arenas or realms; we look at which of them are most salient or developed, how they work together, etc. The framework provides both an organizing system and a kind of checklist that allows us to approach traditions systematically. It can be used to examine a single tradition, but it is also particularly useful for cross-cultural comparisons. While I apply the framework in my forthcoming book, *The Fiber of Our Lives: Why Textiles Matter* (Thames & Hudson, 2011), this is the first place I explicitly spell out the model and offer it as a template for others to follow.



**Figure 1.** Schematic view of overarching model, indicating the various human domains or “needs” that textiles may be part of. These are both considered on an everyday basis and mapped against special life rituals and rites of passage. All is understood in the “container” of human consciousness, which includes references to textiles in language, metaphor, and myth.

(Fig. 1) The overarching model has many interrelated parts. It includes examination of the roles textiles play in our many domains or arenas (some models posit these as human “needs”), considering them in terms of both everyday activities and special life rituals or rites of passage. All of these are understood within the “container” of thought and consciousness. I introduce these examinations or operations as sequential steps, and it is indeed helpful to proceed systematically in some given order, but there is no implied hierarchy about which of the operations should be considered paramount.

**In considering the textiles in any given culture, I suggest the place to begin is to get a sense of the deep associations and meanings that textiles hold in cultural consciousness by examining language, metaphor, and myth.** The English language, for example, is full of expressions that indicate how central textiles are in our collective consciousness; we often visualize our reality in textile terms. The expressions and metaphors refer to textile elements (fibers, filaments, cords, strings, or threads), textile processes, and finished cloth. Sometimes the metaphors are biological—fiber terms, in particular, are used to express the essential stuff of which we are made. We use expressions such as “life cord,” “life hanging by a thread,” “moral fiber,” and the “fiber of our being.” We routinely describe DNA—our very genetic codes and life building-blocks—as strands that twist or ply around one another. Even the birth of the universe is seen as a vibrating filament of energy, as theoretical physicists speak of the smallest known bit of matter coming into existence as “string theory.”

Many of the world’s esoteric concepts are also symbolically explained with textile metaphor. Hindus articulate concepts such as the “veil of Maya,” the web of illusion we are all caught in, and “Indra’s net,” a connective web where each of us functions as a node. In the West, Biblical textile metaphor reminds us that all is impermanent, and there is “a time to rend, and a time to sew.” For most of us, the “internet” serves as an infinitely expanding connective web that affects us almost daily. Textiles give us social metaphor: we speak of people’s lives as “interwoven” in a “social fabric,” or as “entwined” or “inextricably bound” with one another. Textile expressions evoke emotions—we can be “cloaked in fear” or “clothed in darkness”—and many imply or allude to the magic of creation. When we spin out a thread or make a solid fabric from mere wisps of fiber, we are seemingly making something out of nothing. We speak of “spinning a yarn” when we draw out words and put them together to tell a tale, and we “put a spin on” ideas or events, shaping them as we would like them to be. People who dabble in magic “weave” spells. Making cloth is almost universally considered akin to making life. Thread is often understood as a pathway—a line to follow. A string tied around the finger serves a memory trigger. In ancient Greek myth, Theseus followed a thread out of the impossible labyrinth. Today, we follow “threads” in on-line conversations, as our discussions weave in and out of each other.

**The second aspect of understanding the meanings of textiles in any given culture is to look at the way the culture positions cloth at steps along the mortal journey: the roles it plays at milestones across the life span of the people.** All of us are literally involved with textiles from the moment we are born to the moment we die. Babies are quickly wiped down and wrapped up in cloth when they come into the world. In the West, it is primarily a practical matter that babies are “received” in soft blankets, but in some cultures, receiving cloths hold symbolic resonance and protective power. Wixárika (Huichol) babies are wrapped in fresh cotton fabric which is considered synonymous with the materialization of a living, breathing infant.<sup>1</sup> In rituals that welcome children into the community soon after birth, ceremonial cloth is often used to reinforce the idea of cultural continuity. Christians dress babies in elaborate christening or baptism gowns, which may be passed down in families for generations.

Around the world, we find many instances where a single textile played a central role at subsequent rites of passage. Among the Toba Batak in Indonesia, the same ceremonial mantle announced a boy’s birth and was later used at his wedding. In Slovakia and some Czech communities, the shawl a woman wore at her wedding functioned as a “pulling cloth” at the birth of her child, and was then used as a screening device for the bed where she had to remain for over a month. It also wrapped the baby when he or she was carried to the church for baptism. In the indigenous Bali Mula community, striped cloths that symbolized the human life cycle first

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<sup>1</sup> To save space, references other than quotes are omitted here. They are available from the author and in her forthcoming book: Beverly Gordon, *The Fiber of Our Lives: Why Textiles Matter* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011).

honored babies at three months of age, and then were taken out at every life-transition ceremony for that individual.

New fibers or textiles were also incorporated into initiation, coming-of-age, or graduation rituals. Sometimes it was a ritual thread that tied the initiate to his new state. This was the case among Brahmin Hindu boys, who had threads tied around their waists to indicate they were coming of age religiously and were thus tied to the community. At other times individuals were given new garments to mark their new status. In ancient Rome, upper-class boys put on the *toga virilis* for the first time. Jewish boys (and now some girls) traditionally receive a prayer shawl at their Bar (or Bas) Mitzvah. College graduates wear special gowns, and ritually move tassels on their mortarboard hats from one side to another when the ceremony is complete.

Trousseaux or dowry textiles had meaning before, during, and after a wedding. Dowry traditions were particularly strong in the pre-modern period in Turkey. Girls would begin working on their trousseau (*çeyiz*) from the time they were very young. A few pieces would traditionally be presented to the groom's family before the wedding, and most would figure into the ritual itself. On the first day of the wedding festivities, the *çeyiz* would be carried publicly from the bride's house to the couple's new home, and once there, the textiles were laid out in an attractive display, often forming a kind of bower. The bride would sit among the cloths to receive her guests, who were able to inspect her handwork and assess her technical and aesthetic skills. Public inspection of dowry textiles was also traditional in Hungary and Central Europe. In many places, fabric exchange between the families of the bride and groom took place before the wedding. On the Indonesian island of Sumba, as many as forty women's skirts passed from family to family.

Textiles play important roles in wedding rituals. In addition to special clothing, the bond of marriage is frequently symbolized by a literal kind of ceremonial binding together or enfolding. "Handfasting" rituals were not only common in Celtic Europe (hence the expression, "tying the knot"), but also in Asia: in Lao Buddhist ceremonies, the officiator and wedding guests bless the wedding couple by tying cotton strings around their wrists; the Chinese Khirghiz playfully tie the couple together until family and friends give them gifts. At Greek Orthodox weddings, strands from the bride and groom's beribboned crowns are entwined together; at those of Native Americans of the northern Plains, a couple might be wrapped or enfolded under a single blanket. The marriage space may itself be set off with a textile. In Morocco, an Amazigh (Berber) wedding takes place in a specially-erected bridal tent, big enough to hold the whole community. In the ancient world, the bride and groom were secluded under a nuptial tent as well, and Jews still hold weddings under a four-cornered canopy, the *chuppa*. Similar canopies are used in India. Many of the textile-related wedding rituals refer—some more overtly than others—to sexuality and fertility. The Greek wedding tent was acknowledged this way; the phrase, "to go under the same cloak" implied that the couple was bonded in a sexual union. In many cultures, the marriage bed was elaborately dressed to celebrate the union, and there was the well-known tradition of bringing back bloody sheets from the wedding night to prove that the bride came to the union as a virgin.

Cloth is widely integral to the celebration of maintaining the calendrical cycle and regularly repeating holidays. For their planting and harvest rituals, the Toraja of Indonesia drape a huge stairway with rolls of cloth believed to bring the blessings of the ancestors and ensure a fertile crop. In Japan, special cloths are brought out at the New Year to call in the spirits. The Hmong traditionally mark the New Year—and its fresh beginning—with a new set of hand-embellished clothing. Weekly, observant Jews put on special Sabbath clothes to mark their day of rest. Annually, they bring out dedicated tablecloths and matzo covers for Passover *seders* (ritual dinners).

Finally, textiles routinely mark the end of the mortal journey. A corpse is almost always wrapped or covered with cloth. When an individual dies, a sheet is pulled up over his face, indicating he no longer needs to breathe. Body bags are used to cover those killed in battle or who need to be transported to a morgue. Bodies are also wrapped in shrouds, and cloth is used to line coffins. Coffins in turn are further covered with other

fabric (*pall*), sometimes in the form of a flag. Fine textiles may also honor the dead or help assist the passage to the next life. The Sumbanese help the soul move on by wrapping the dead in textiles that they know will outlast the flesh they enfold. This will not only identify the deceased to the underworld, but protect the soul from malevolent forces during the transition. Although cloth does not survive well in most burials, the vast amount of it that has been unearthed in dry areas such as the Peruvian coast shows us how much might be provided for the afterlife journey. Some burial textiles were enormous; a typical single cotton shroud found on a mummy from the pre-Columbian Paracas culture measured about 300 square yards. In ancient Egypt, fabric was involved in many steps of the embalming process. As a corpse was prepared, linen pads were placed in hollow areas as it dried out. Arms and legs, and sometimes even fingers and toes, were bandaged separately, and then twenty or more layers of alternating shrouds and bandages were wrapped around the entire body. The whole would then be wrapped in long linen strips.

Textiles certainly also play a symbolic role for those left behind. We have cited the Biblical verses that allude to mourners tearing their clothes apart—it is a time when what had been whole no longer is. In Kendang, Indonesia, mourners hold a large black cloth over the deceased, and then tear it into as many strips as there are surviving siblings. Public grieving is marked in the West by flags flown at half mast.

**The final and perhaps most involved step in this model is to turn to the activities that take place between important life passages and discover the myriad roles that textiles play in daily life. We do this by mapping out the domains of human activity and concern, and uncovering the roles textiles play in each of them.** I have looked at and synthesized a range of existing systems that map out or organize these domains: Abraham Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Human Needs,” the Hindu chakra system, the kabbalistic tree of life, and the spiral dynamics model popularized by Ken Wilber. These systems have different starting points and intentions, but all posit similar concerns, from basic survival to social interaction to transcendent experience. My model summarizes these domains, which I conceive of as existing inside the container of human consciousness. Although I present them as a vertical list, they are not necessarily in order of inherent importance; the list is meant to be inclusive rather than hierarchical. Diverging from Maslow’s model, I am not concerned with progression from one level to another—in reality they all co-exist and we move back and forth among them, often operating on many at the same time. The mapping is merely a convenient and systematic way of capturing these different arenas and concerns. The examples I provide for each arena should give a sense of the kinds of information or activities that might be relevant.

*The first arena relates to physical and survival needs: food, shelter, bodily comfort and physical protection, and psychic safety.* Textiles are central to basic survival, often in many ways that most of us never even think of. They have always been part of the way that we human beings know and connect with the material planet we live on—the Earth. The fibers that go into cloth are made from its very substances, and allow us to create micro-environments that allow us to live in all of its sometimes inhospitable environments. Appropriate garments protect against extreme cold, heat, sun, wind, or excessive moisture—and in the case of spacesuits, even against a lack of atmosphere. Textiles also provide environmental shelter. Tents not only provide temporary housing for refugees or the homeless, but permanent homes for many. Nomadic people needed lightweight, portable shelter, and used textile coverings, ranging from goat or yak hair to thick felts. In warm climates, houses woven straw or reed protect from sun, rain, and insects. Modern technology is now spawning a new field—fabric architecture—that is creating a new generation of environmentally sound cloth-covered structures. (One example is the Denver Airport.)

Textiles also add to physical comfort inside a house. Most of us use soft bedding or upholstery materials, but beyond that, the primary home furnishings in many cultures were made of cloth. In traditional Asian societies, in particular, people sat and carried out all of their activities on cushions or mats on the floor; it was the changing textile furnishings that delineated different functions in multi-purpose rooms. Some people make their very beds as textile structures: hammocks work well in tropical climates and on

swaying ships, for example, and rope beds are common in India. Textiles insulate cold floors and walls—the huge tapestries of medieval Europe, now remembered primarily in terms of aesthetics and narrative content, actually helped insulate the period’s stone castles. Insulation could take unexpected forms. In medieval Europe, wooden bath tubs were often lined with fabric as protection against splinters, and were at times further enclosed under a cloth canopy which both provided privacy and kept the bathers warm by trapping the steam rising off the hot water. Fibers also provide light in dark interiors. Worldwide, candles and lamps have always relied on twisted or braided wicks to draw up the wax or oil to allow burning at an even rate. Today, fiber optic technology is being used to transmit light as well.

Textiles have been vitally important to human beings in terms of procuring, preparing, and storing food. Elizabeth Barber coined the phrase “the string revolution” to describe what happened when our ancestors learned to make cordage or thread, somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 years ago. With string, people could make tethers and leashes, handles, fish lines. They could bind stone or wood tools together. They could weave baskets and make snares or nets to catch game and fish—and snaring animals was both an effective and low-risk way to hunt. String-makers could also fashion slings and nets to carry babies, and once their hands were freed up from this task, even childbearing women became more mobile and able to participate in food procurement—hunting, gathering, and eventually agriculture. Nets and snares are still used for fishing, trapping, holding and protecting crops, weighing foodstuffs, and holding game or produce. Rope and cordage were used in bowstrings, slingshots and harpoons, and were part of the masts or sails that helped propel the boats used for fishing expeditions. Many varieties of textile containers hold and transport food—even liquids. Tightly-woven baskets functioned as milk containers in East and North Africa, for example, and today, high-tech “Super Sacks”® can hold and transport tons of liquid across the ocean. Sieves and winnowing devices help with cooking tasks such as separating wheat from chaff or curds from whey. Cooking is also done *in* textiles. Native peoples in California made stews by filling tightly-woven baskets with water and dropping in fiery hot stones to bring it to a boil.

Textiles help us stay healthy and safe. We use cloth to clean ourselves and our environment, and to protect us from germs and unwanted pests. Surgeons put on special “scrubs” and face masks, and use thread to sew people back together; policemen wear bullet-proof vests; all of us put on bandages when we have been cut. The mosquito net protects from malaria, which is often lethal. Cloth protects against human attack as well. Camouflage fabric is used in battle. “Poor-man’s armor” in medieval Europe was made of heavily fulled (boiled) woolen cloth; samurai armor relied on silk cords laced through protective plates that helped absorb the energy of a sword. Parachutes protect from hard landings. Tethers are used by mountain climbers, and construction and rescue workers. We use seat belts and other restraining straps, and rely on safety nets and shade-giving awnings. Sandbags help fend off floods, and booms contain threatening ocean oil spills.

Psychic protection and a sense of comfort is also a human need. Young children bond with their baby blankets; the cloth becomes associated with—actually seems to hold the energy of—the comfort and safety of peaceful sleep, protective parents, and perhaps even the contentment of nursing. In India, children whose mothers wear saris often form the same sort of attachments with the free-hanging patterned end. In West Africa, where babies are tightly tied to the mother’s back for much of the day, the concept of “backing” has come to stand for a sense of comfort, protection, and well-being. Many textiles are believed to bestow spiritual protection to adults as well. They provide a protective shield against unwanted energies or unseen forces—even against the wrong kind of social gaze. Christians credited Crusade-era battle victories to the sacred textiles they carried with them into the fray, such as a banner made from part of St. Cuthbert’s shroud, Malian Bogolanfini (mud) cloth was traditionally worn by hunters, pregnant or menstruating women, or others who were in danger of losing blood. Individuals receive comfort, also, from textiles specifically made for that purpose. Today, quilts are made for children with terminal cancer or refugees fleeing natural disasters. Shawls are made for battered women and

cancer patients. They “wrap, enfold, comfort, cover, give solace, mother, hug, shelter, and beautify” the recipients.<sup>2</sup>

Textiles help us get from place to place: we use sails, woven rafts and coracles (basket-like boats) to get across the water, and rope bridges to cross over it. The first airplane had muslin wings, and today’s space travel still involves sophisticated fiber technologies. Landscape and civil engineers are currently incorporating textiles into the very ground we live on, as “geotextiles,” heavy-duty porous fabrics, are literally woven into and helping stabilize the earth.

Even the most prosaic everyday activities involve used cloth. Woven or braided bands were critical in tying up all kind of things —packages, documents, feed sacks, animal harnesses, blinds, mattresses, clothing, etc. We think of the word “tape” today in terms of cellophane or other plastic materials, but the word used to refer to a narrow band that we might now call lacing, strapping or ribbon. Little scraps of fabric were similarly used as we now use tissues and paper products. The expression “being on the rag,” indicating a woman is menstruating, came from the fact that absorbent scraps served as sanitary napkins. Textile-making has itself often functioned as an income-producing endeavor that helps people survive in difficult times.

*The next arena or domain relates to our social selves. We interact with others; we need to feel a sense of belonging and love.* Cloth is central in our lives as social beings. It bonds us to our families, even those who have passed on. The Tuvan reindeer herders of Mongolia used “magic” knots to keep themselves connected with ancestral energies. Particular pieces of cloth seem to hold the spirit of those who have touched or lived with them, and because cloth is portable and easily stored, it is often sent home when family members are far away and want to send back a “piece” of themselves. Soldiers fighting in World Wars I and II sent handkerchiefs or pillow covers to their wives or mothers because they could anticipate those items in use; a handkerchief sent to a lover might for example be worn close to her body. The cloth was a stand-in, an embodiment of the relationship between the individuals. Textiles also serve as heirlooms. Any fabric used by a loved one can function this way, but some textiles are purposely made with fabrics that were part of individuals’ clothing. Doris Benedict, remembered lying in bed and looking at quilts made from family scraps. “It got to be a challenge to say, ‘That was Grandpa’s and this was Mom’s and that was Dads’,’ just from going through the patchwork as you lay there in the evening remembering who wore what and then what it looked like on them. . . it gave you a sense of warmth and closeness to other members of your family.”<sup>3</sup> A relatively new tradition is the “passage quilt,” made to help mourners get through their bereavement. These memorials are constructed from clothing left behind by the recently-deceased loved one. They contain everything from evening gowns to golf shirts.

Intimate love relations and sexuality are also expressed and represented through textiles. Clothing can hold sexual promise; tassels and fringe, in particular, hold a sense of allure. Hopi brides carried sashes with long fringes alluding to life-giving rain (fecundity), and Amazigh (Berber) brides are dressed in belts with sensual hanging tassels. In many preindustrial cultures, spinning activities carried overt sexual associations and were often part of the courtship process.

Cloth is used to express respect, group affiliation and identity. In the Himalayan region, fabric gifts (e.g. scarves) are routinely exchanged on all social occasions, rather as flowers are in Western culture. In 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marites N. Sison, “Shawls Encircle Owners in Prayer,” [*Canadian*] *Anglican Journal*, April 2004 on [http://www.shawlministry.com/Articles/Anglican\\_Journal.htm](http://www.shawlministry.com/Articles/Anglican_Journal.htm), accessed 2/10.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict cited in Marsha MacDowell and Kurt C. Dewhurst, eds., *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions* (Albuquerque: Museum of New Mexico Press and Michigan State Univ. Museum, 1997), 19.

century America, members of a particular church sometimes got together to make a “friendship quilt” for their minister. Native Americans use commercial trade blankets and handmade quilts to bestow honor in a community context—for example, they are given to basketball players or recent graduates. Often, it is by dressing alike or wearing distinctive garments or distinctive designs that we affirm our belonging to certain social groups. Volumes have been written about the particular styles worn by various ethnic or folk groups, or about sartorial symbols such as the nun’s habit or Sikh’s turban. Textiles also function as tangible expressions of what are in some senses larger intangible entities—extensive and diverse geographic areas, political territories, and abstract concepts and beliefs. National flags, for example, become literal representatives of the national “body,” and hold enormous power. In the United States we literally pledge allegiance to a flag. Others flags represent contested identity. Those standing for the African National Congress (South Africa) and the Palestinian state were once outlawed by the dominant political regime in their respective countries, and people bravely displayed them, despite being subject to punishment and reprisals. Today, we have some flags (the U.N., the Earth Flag) and other textiles that represent global unity. Projects like “The Cloth of Many Colors” envisioned by “peace troubadour” James Twyman involve fabric contributions from people around the world.

The act of working together on textile-making has long been an important way of furthering a sense of group cohesion. This was true in traditional work “bees” for activities like processing fiber or making quilts and is equally evident in today’s burgeoning craft groups. Social bonding is often equally salient in activities related to caring for textiles (washing clothes together by the river) or selling them (coming together in bazaars and marketplaces). To a surprising extent, fibers and textiles are also part of leisure activities, celebration, and play. Strings and cords are used to make musical instruments, and we play “jump rope” and tug-of-war with heavier ropes. Many sports are built around nets (e.g., basketball, volleyball, tennis, ping pong, soccer, hockey) or particular textiles such as pool table felts, treader’s capes, hot air balloons, racing sails. Dance and performance outfits often involve some kind of expansive or mobile cloth that enhances movement, and dress-up clothes are an integral part of play the world over.

Unfortunately, much human social interaction involves individuals or groups that come to wield power or control over others. I posit the arena of social and economic power relationships as the next category in the model. (Depending on context, the subject of trade may fit here or in the previous category of social community.) Throughout the world, people have demonstrated their high status and political or economic power through costly textiles. It is astonishing to contemplate the time it would take to complete just one luxury textile: four to five weavers working steadily for at least a year for a Baroque tapestry, for example, or thirty men working for approximately nine months on a very fine Kashmir shawl. Fibers that were rare or difficult to procure or process added to a fabric’s value, as did those colored with costly dyes. Murex purple, which was extracted from snails, was so associated with temporal might in the ancient world that Byzantine robes were said to be “born to the purple.” When Alexander the Great’s troops captured Persia in 331 B.C.E., they found a vast store of purple robes in the royal treasury—a literal stockpile of power. Similarly, in the 16th century cochineal red was so valuable that it was the subject of international intrigue. Pound for pound, it was one of the most valuable goods a pirate could capture.

Textiles themselves served as a currency or medium of exchange in many times and places. In the Western Zhou period in China (1027-771 B.C.E.), one horse and one bolt of silk could be exchanged for five slaves; in 18<sup>th</sup> century Madagascar, fine indigo-dyed silk cloth was worth the equivalent of six or seven slaves. Cloth was also used to pay ransom, and people of many civilizations owed fiber or cloth tribute payments to their leaders. In ancient China, governments demanded silk as a form of tax; in Mexico, each of the residents of the pre-conquest Aztec Empire owed goods (cotton, mats, cochineal, woven tunics, feathers, etc.) or services to the state. So much cloth was produced by subjects of the Incan state that when Spanish conquerors had taken all they wanted from the floor-to-ceiling piles in state warehouses, it barely made a dent in the pile. In the Asante kingdom in Ghana, stores of prestigious kente



cloths were left in the care of a dedicated official charged with maintaining them and selecting them for the king's public appearances. By one account, there were once 300,000 cloths in the treasury.

Conspicuous consumption of fine fabrics was always a show of power. Sometimes they were worn on the body. Queen Elizabeth I had over 300 fine gowns and wore amazingly detailed lace neck ruffs, a single yard of which might take months to make. Ottoman, Byzantine, Persian and Mughal rulers awarded "robes of honor" to government and military personnel, visiting dignitaries, and ambassadors, and exchanged them for diplomatic purposes. Other textiles were publicly displayed. European tapestries were routinely brought outside for dramatic processions or encampments. The phrase "the red carpet treatment" originated in a time where individuals demonstrated their public importance by literally crushing priceless cloth beneath their feet.

Because of their economic value, textiles have deeply affected the course of world trade and history. Cloth literally functioned as the backbone of countless local, national and global economies. Florence, the center of Renaissance culture, was built on textile wealth (at least a third of the population was directly involved in the textile trade). In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Louis XIV strengthened the French state by establishing state-run textile workshops (silk and tapestry weaving, embroidery, lace-making, and ribbon-making), and demanding that all French citizens patronize their products. He effectively forced his nobles to spend their fortunes on costly formal court dress. The slave trade, too, was directly related to cloth; European ships sailed to Africa with cargoes of cotton fabric, firearms, and liquor, which were exchanged for captured individuals who were taken to provide cheap plantation labor in the Americas. Once emptied of their human cargo, slave ships returned to Europe loaded with the products of those plantations—rum, sugar, tobacco, and ironically, eventually cotton.

Textiles can be used to separate, or reduce a sense of community. At the extreme, they can be used to kill—one can be smothered or suffocated with a piece of fabric, or strangled with a rope. More often, they are implicated in the mistreatment and subjugation of one person or group over another. The most iconic example of subjugating fabric was the yellow cloth star Jews were forced to wear in Hitler's Germany, but other examples include the white hoods of the Ku Klux Klan or the mandated use of chadors or burqas in some parts of the Middle East today. Other symbols of separation include "Iron Curtain," the military, political, and ideological barrier established between the Soviet bloc and the West from 1945 to 1990; and the literal curtain placed between the male and female areas in places of worship in early Christian churches, Orthodox Jewish synagogues and Muslim mosques.

The horrors associated with early industrial textile manufacture, including the nightmarish conditions of the early English factory system, affected men, women, and children, and even today there are situations where children are tied to looms because their small fingers can tie delicate knots for pile rugs. There are also important instances when textile workers have risen up to protest their working conditions or what they perceived to be a threat to their livelihood. One such protest has even yielded a word—"Luddite"—that is now used to describe someone who is resistant to new technologies. Cloth itself has also been used as a sign and vehicle of political resistance. The phenomenon was dramatically demonstrated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian struggle for independence and self-government. Gandhi (who is said to have wept when he first realized what India had lost when forced out of its own cloth manufacture) called for a boycott of foreign cloth, and the Indian National Congress required its officers and supporters to wear hand-spun, hand-woven cloth (*khadi*), which became known as the "livery of freedom."

*Cloth has an important communicative role, and this is the next arena of my model.* Linear elements alone sometimes carry messages. Pre-Columbian Andean peoples developed a sophisticated information storage system using knotted cords or string called khipu. Information is passed across long distances through other cords—the telegraph cable in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fiber optic filaments today. Fibers can now also be "smart" —"intelligent" enough to react to and communicate with their environment. They are

electronically programmed and engineered with internal sensors to react to stimuli from mechanical, thermal, chemical, electrical, or magnetic sources. Simpler fabrics communicate through visual code: heraldic banners immediately identified their bearers' allegiances, for example, and coded flag systems are operative on both land and sea. Textiles also "speak" of atrocities or name names that sometimes cannot be said aloud. Examples include *arpilleras*, pictorial embroideries illustrating the horrors of the repressive Pinochet regime in Chile; the composite NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt; and Hmong story cloths. Advocates fighting for political or social causes such as abolition and temperance similarly made their views known on fabric. Once technology made it easy to print directly on fabric, the range of communicative textiles expanded exponentially. In Africa, expressive commemorative cloth and "conversation prints" drape entire bodies, and the message T-shirt is now seen around the world.

When worn on the body, textiles were often organized as a kind of "cosmological map," representing various cultural models of universal order. The construction and layout of the emperor's dragon robe of late imperial China were aligned with the directions and the 9- and 12-part divisions of the Chinese universe, for example, and its consistently-repeated imagery represented a controlled world, where everything was in its rightful place. The layout of the traditional huipil or blouse from Chichicastenango, Guatemala also symbolically represents the world. When opened out, it takes the form of a cross, alluding to the four cardinal directions much like the dragon robe.

Cloth communicates (and is the result of) the ingenuity of human invention. Complex designs were often achieved with the simplest technologies—in many cases, just sticks and string. Some scholars feel that the thought processes involved in textile techniques had a huge impact on human culture—they provided the impetus for much of human advancement. Archeologist Glynn Isaac claims that the invention of basketmaking was the "watershed achievement of all time" that may have helped expand the human brain. Sadie Plant believes the inventions or devices that sped up or simplified textile-making led to new ways of thinking or doing; they were "literally the software linings" of technology of all kinds, and the technologies helped create an almost "new people," more prone to capitalism, speed and abstract thinking.<sup>4</sup> Ingenuity is also involved in the aesthetic realm, of course, and *the next domain in my model, which is often inseparable from communication, is aesthetic. We seem to need to create a beautiful, sensually- satisfying environment.* In areas where the physical landscape is dry, dusty or colorless, people often add visual stimulation and excitement through bright, energetic textiles. In northwest India, for example, Rabari and Kutch women routinely dress in intense oranges and reds, and stitch in mirrors that catch the light of the sun with every step. There is actually an aesthetic dimension to almost everything I have discussed, and hopefully this arena may be easy to grasp. One way to think about a given culture is to see how dominant its aesthetic elaboration is. In some cases, textile traditions become more intricate and expressive over time. This is true for Kuna molas and Haitian vodou flags, for example. Contemporary fiber artists use textiles to express their ideas, often using traditional techniques in innovative new ways and pushing the boundaries of techniques that had had proscribed histories.

All of these artists use cloth as an aesthetic outlet—a way of expressing their creative vision. "*Self actualization*" and *personal fulfillment is the next domain or arena in my model.* Textile-making can seem magical (again, is a generative process), an almost hypnotic, healing activity; engaging with the repetitive, rhythmic steps of sewing, knitting, weaving and similar techniques can create a sense of peace or calm. The action itself engenders this quality, but it is strengthened by the sensual pleasure of handling the thread or yarn and watching a new form grow beneath one's hands. Cloth-making creates the "relaxation response," a measurable state where brain waves change and heart rate, muscle tension and blood pressure decrease and a feeling of serenity ensues. Techniques like knitting involve both left- and

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<sup>4</sup> Isaac cited in Jack Lenor Larsen and Betty Freudenheim, *Interlacing: The Elemental Fabric* (New York: Kodansha, 1986), 18-19; Sadie Plant, *Zeroes + Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 61, 64.

right-brained activities, and the process is said to harmonize the two sides of the brain. Working with cloth often functions as a way of centering, building self esteem and feeling comforted or coming back to center after a traumatic incident. Some say it helps them get in touch with a higher power.

*The final arena is a spiritual one, where individuals connect to something transcendent.* Textiles play a myriad of roles in this domain as well. “Snowy white” fabric has a near-universal association with spiritual purity, and is often worn in religious ritual. It is used in ceremonies of atonement, and when entering an exalted state. Muslim pilgrims who go to Mecca for the Hajj mark the transition from the secular to the sacred state by changing into white garments when they arrive at the city boundary. Cloth helps sacralize space in other ways as well. Temple hangings may surround believers with a “thousand Buddhas,” reflecting the idea that the cosmic consciousness of the Buddha is limitless, or with the name of Allah in endless repeat. Individual prayer shawls create a small sacred space by effectively surrounding the body in a tent of holiness. Jews often draw their shawls up over their heads and faces when they are deep in prayer, shutting out the mundane world.

Textiles also contain sacred objects and energies. Buddhist sutras (holy manuscripts) are wrapped in cloth, as are the Jewish Torah scrolls. The *Kaa’ba*, a cubical building in the center of Mecca which is the “holy of holies” of the Muslim religion, is protected by a huge (658-square-meter) black and gold cloth, the *kiswah*, which cascades down over the sides of the structure. The Akan people of Ghana cover spirit figures and shrine houses that honor the power of their river, the Tano, with prestigious kente cloth. Native Americans wrap their drums, which represent the “heartbeat” of the people, in protective fabric. In South American shamanic traditions, spiritual leaders carry stones, herbs and other powerful objects in a woven *mesa*. Cloth may even contain and amplify energies in the head. Turbans and feather-covered diadems, for example, both serve as a sign of respect and augment the wearer’s spiritual power.

Textiles are frequently used to heal the physical body and the spirit. Shamans from Siberia to Latin America are believed to travel along threads as they move between worlds, and actual strings are used in many restorative rituals. Indian silk patola cloth is believed to heal mental illness. Small pieces are cut from the sacred fabric and burned, and the patient inhales the pungent smoke. (Thus, it is not unusual to find some of these highly valued cloths with tiny missing sections.) Balinese double ikat cloth (geringsing, which means “not plague”) is believed to keep sickness, harm or misfortune away from both individuals and the community as a whole. Moroccans specifically “charge” many of their fabrics with spiritual blessing to give them healing qualities. There is a long tradition in the West of healing with a cloth that has been prayed over by a person of spiritual authority. Both the Yoruba and the Balinese use fabric made with equal numbers of black and white threads to help create a sense of equilibrium.

Cloth is also used for intercession on a broader scale. The Himalayan prayer flags that carry requests and blessings on the wind are usually made of small rectangles of colored fabric, strung together horizontally. Spiritually-focused dance garments are also believed to increase communication with other realms by moving with the wind. Since cloth does hold an energetic charge, small pieces are often given as an offering to a higher power. Native Americans leave prayer ties and/or bundles, typically filled with tobacco, that both express thanks and increase the efficacy of any request. These may be tied to trees, and in fact, trees draped this way with fabric are found around the world. In Europe, they are known as “rag trees,” raggedy bushes or wishing trees. Wherever prayer flags or ties are used, the cloth is allowed to disintegrate.

There are other aspects of textile study that may be plugged into the model where relevant. Since I am concerned with meanings, I am not looking specifically at construction or iconographic analysis, for example, although they may come to the fore in particular categories, such as aesthetic meaning or community life. In sum, I hope this holistic framework will prove useful to others, and hope to hear how it is being adapted.